

**GENDER PRIVILEGE AND THE CULTURE OF THE ONTARIO SCHOOL SYSTEM:  
A MID- TO LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY CASE STUDY  
OF A MALE PUBLIC SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL**

[Beth Wilcox](#), *School District 57, British Columbia*

This study uses an adapted public history methodology of a local case study to analyze interviews conducted with a former Ontario teacher and principal. It draws on literature and historical documents regarding teaching between the 1950s–1980s to examine the typical experience of public school professionals in that time and discuss structural trends and beliefs regarding credentialism, local school board organization, and gender in the Ontario education system.

Since a publicly financed education system was established throughout Canada in the nineteenth century, the educational policies and regulations governing teachers, students, and curriculum have been the jurisdiction of the provinces. As many researchers, such as Cavanagh (2003), have noted, within the province of Ontario, the working conditions of individual teachers varied widely until the 1960s. This was primarily the result of vague provincial legislation which allowed regional school boards and communities to determine the specific responsibilities of teachers, negotiate salaries, and fund schools.

Across Ontario, the organization of school boards varied before the 1950s. Schools were grouped into city or county districts or inspectorates. Within the inspectorate divisions, there was little consistency in the organizational structure. Generally, each inspectorate was composed of numerous school boards. The guidelines governing school board boundaries were hazy, but each school board usually had at least one open school (Ontario Department of

Education [ODE], 1953). In his book, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976*, Stamp (1982) described how the Department of Education pushed towards increased centralization in the late 1950s and early 1960s. School boards were amalgamated into township-sized boards and larger central schools were constructed. Only a few years later, these boards were again amalgamated into countywide boards.

The historical “independence of local school boards,” the “provincial constitutional autonomy in education,” and “the relative paucity of research in educational history,” contribute to Harrigan’s (1986) conclusion that “it is within . . . local case studies that we find some of the most informative research” (p. 81). As a result, I have chosen to explore the experience of public school professionals by focusing on one subject, my maternal grandfather Barry Jackson. In this analysis, I adapt the public history methodological style to explore Barry’s career using two recorded interviews conducted with Barry in March 2010, and drawing from historical accounts and studies on the teaching profession, including research by Reynolds (1990,1995). To date, Reynolds has conducted one of the most comprehensive analyses of teachers who became principals in Ontario between the 1940s and 1980s. Reynolds interviewed male and female principals in the Toronto school board (approximately 220 km away from Barry’s home town). While attempts have been made not to over-generalize the typicality of the Toronto teachers, comparisons between Barry’s experiences and those of Reynolds’ interviewees do allows for hypotheses to be constructed regarding the typicality of Barry’s experiences. I focus on the start of his career in the 1950s, his decision to pursue professional qualifications, and his promotion to principalship as I explore how his experiences both confirm and reject the “typical” experience of public school professionals from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Barry's career in education highlights the culture of Ontario's rural school system at the mid-twentieth century. Barry's account of how he was hired as a teacher, his decision to make teaching his career, and why he became a principal also highlight the pervasive gender imbalances within the profession. In many ways, Barry's experiences were typical of male teachers at the time, but male teachers were only a small percent of the teaching force, and this minority had a markedly different experience when compared to female teachers.

Kenneth Barry Jackson was born on March 17, 1934, on the family homestead at Paudash Lake, near Bancroft, Ontario. In this rural area, lumber was one of the main industries. Barry's father, Gord, was a lumberman and a farmer. Gord only attended school to Grade 8 but was a very intelligent man. Barry's mother, Ruby, was a teacher. Ruby taught before the birth of her first child, and she returned to teaching on an occasional basis in the 1950s.

According to research conducted by Reynolds (1990), Barry's family background was much like the background of most teachers at the time. Reynolds (1990) found that the fathers of the individuals who became teachers in the 1950s and 1960s were often clerical workers, labourers, or farmers. Like Barry, their mothers were often employed before marriage. Furthermore, like 71% of Ontario teachers in 1961, Barry's ethnic background is British. As Reynolds (1990) noted, the percentage of educators of British ancestry was more than 10% higher than the percentage of individuals of British ancestry in the Ontario labour force (p. 117).

Various coincidences led to Barry beginning his career as a teacher. Barry had not planned on becoming a teacher (personal communication, March 3, 2010). At nineteen years old, and having been one of the few youth in his community to complete Grade 13, Barry postponed finding a job after graduation. Instead, he decided to concentrate on playing in his all-star Ontario baseball team until the season was over. Barry believed that having completed Grade 13

he could get any entry-level job he wanted. He assumed he would work in the hydroelectric industry or with Bell Canada. Instead, his career in education began fortuitously when, two weeks before the school year began, the district inspector phoned and offered Barry a position teaching a one-room schoolhouse in Ormsby, Ontario. Barry believes there were three reasons why the inspector decided to approach him with the job offer: he knew Barry had finished Grade 13, he knew Ruby was a teacher, and he knew Barry was familiar with the culture of rural schools, having attended one himself (personal communication, March 3, 2010).

Barry accepted the offer and was sent to work in Ormsby where he was responsible for teaching forty-one students in Grades 1 to 8 (personal communication, March 3, 2010). This was above the average student to teacher ratio in Canada. According to Harrigan (1992), the average ratio was 1 teacher per 28 students in 1950, and 1 teacher per 27 students in 1955. Being well above the average was somewhat due to the rural school system at the time, which struggled with the difficulties brought on by the low population density and lack of centralized township schools. This high ratio was somewhat normal, as Harrigan (1992) noted, “historically Ontario ha[d] the highest ratio” of students per teacher in Canada and “these maintained over time until 1960” (p. 505).

Barry was able to be employed as a teacher without any training because he had a letter of permission from the Department of Education (ODE, 1953). As Cavanagh (2003) noted, the Minister of Education gave these letters to men and women, granting them permission “to teach in Ontario schools without any kind of teacher training” (p. 43). Letters of permission were very common when Barry began teaching in 1953. According to the Ontario Department of Education (1953) records, 16 of the 66 teachers in Barry’s inspectorate were working with letters of permission. Stamp (1982) noted that letters of permission were granted in high numbers in

response to the “crisis in teacher supply” (p. 198) caused by the post-war baby boom. This demographic shift meant that when Barry graduated Grade 13 in 1953 there was a record number of children starting school. The letters of permission system was one way that the province tried to combat the teacher shortage. However, this letter appears to have been a mere formality and had little effect on Barry. When asked if he applied for the letter of permission, Barry laughed and replied, “Oh no. I didn’t even know I had one!” (personal communication, March 11, 2010).

Barry’s decision to take his first teaching job and later to make the profession his career, was supported by his family in a manner that appears to be atypical of the experiences of male teachers in the 1950s. In the interviews Reynolds (1995) conducted, the men who became teachers between 1930 and 1970 expressed how “others’ reactions to their choice to teach was often problematic” (p. 134). The men “all agreed that little social acceptance had been accorded their decision to become a teacher” (p. 99–100). One male interviewee recalled, “My father thought it was terrible. . . . He said: ‘Why the hell, they’re all women down there’” (p. 101). Reynolds (1995) concludes that the typical male teachers who began working between 1930 and 1970 found that “becoming teachers . . . contravened many of the extra-organizational rules they and others understood about manhood. The benefits of teaching and the security it offered, however, still made it attractive” (p. 135). Barry’s experiences both conform to and reject this characterization.

For Barry, his decision to become a teacher did not meet the same social disapproval that Reynolds described. When asked what motivated him to become a teacher, Barry recalls,

I had never *thought* of being a teacher. . . . I was . . . playing ball, and just going, and the only thing was my mum said, “Why don’t you try it? You have nothing else to do.” And I thought, “okay, why not?” I never thought of being a teacher until . . . they asked. No planning or like that at all. I am one of the few. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

As Barry indicated, his mother encouraged him to accept the teaching position. Barry found widespread social acceptance of his decision. When asked about his family and community's reaction, Barry recalls, "they—like particularly my parents—thought it was great. I think my brothers did too. . . . It was positive, very positive" (personal communication, March 11, 2010).

While Barry did not encounter social disapproval because he was a male teacher, he did acknowledge that such taboos did exist. Barry recalls, "when I first started . . . there was something wrong with a man if he taught the primary [Grades 1–3]. And not too many ladies taught the senior [Grades 6–8]" (personal communication, March 11, 2010). He adds,

The only place you might raise an eyebrow was if a man taught primary. But now it's very accepted. It's a good thing. But the first ones, they raised a few eyebrows. "Why would you want to teach primary? That's for ladies."  
(personal communication, March 11, 2010)

When asked if he taught primary, Barry enthusiastically responded:

Yes. . . . Well, the only primary I taught was . . . from grade 1 to 8 [in a one-room schoolhouse]. And of course I had primary there, but I didn't know what I was doing. And then when I was a principal . . . I'd teach up the grades . . . a quarter of a day. [The teachers would] plan it, and I'd go in and they could do something else. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

Barry reiterates how society's attitude towards male teachers shifted over the course of his career, pointing out that by the 1980s, he had a staff with "some men in the primary, and some women in the senior. [The attitude towards these teachers was] positive all the way" (personal communication, March 11, 2010).

While Barry's interview did not suggest he encountered the social disapproval that Reynolds (1995) described, the economic factors that influenced his career choice were similar to those mentioned by Reynolds' (1990) interviewees. After teaching for a year, Barry decided to pursue a career in education, so he attended Peterborough Teachers' College where he earned his

Level 1 qualifications. When asked why he decided to pursue this profession, Barry highlighted the economic benefits of teaching:

Nobody could get a permanent job really. . . . If you had a permanent job with a pension, *man*, you had it made! You know, so it was a case of . . . hav[ing] a solid job with something. And I did like it—teaching. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

In Reynolds' (1990) interviews, male subjects who began teaching between 1950 and 1970 echoed Barry's statements about the importance of security in their career decision. For example, one man stated, "I suspect that I could have made more money in some kind of other work but those jobs didn't have the security or the kinds of benefits that teaching had" (p. 101). Another subject explained, "if you got a job in teaching you were pretty well set. There wasn't the worry of losing your job" (p. 101). While Reynolds (1990) did not specifically mention pensions, the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan was created in 1917 and Barry's comments show that this was probably important to many young people considering the profession. Only just over half of other workplaces had pensions in the 1950s. For instance, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (1956) noted that in 1953 only 64.3% of Canadian office workers in manufacturing industries reported that their company had a pension plan. As part of their overall security, a pension would have been an important consideration for individuals like Barry contemplating a career in teaching.

While Barry did not feel social disapproval as a male teacher, he did report that his gender facilitated his success in his chosen career. Barry spoke frankly about how his gender made him a desirable candidate for advancement in the profession, even when he had no experience. In 1955, after graduating from teachers' college, Barry was hired as a teacher/principal at a three-room schoolhouse in Crookston, Ontario. Barry specifically recalls the inspector saying that he was looking to hire a "man teacher" (personal communication,

March 3, 2010). As a principal, Barry supervised two teachers, including a woman with higher seniority. According to records from the Ontario Department of Education (1955), Barry's annual salary was \$2,800, while the senior female teacher was paid \$2,400, and the other teacher received \$2,000. Barry was awarded both the position of principal and the added salary primarily because he was a man. Like many historians and education scholars, Barry explained the preference for male principals by drawing on women's domestic responsibilities, saying that normally women didn't want the principal job as they had things they wanted to concentrate on at home (personal communication, March 3, 2010). Hence, Barry says when it came to his first principal position, "if you were a man and a warm body, you got the job. So you can see why I got the job, my body was warm" (personal communication, March 3, 2010).

The preference given to Barry as a male teacher reflects a gender bias with strong roots in the Ontario public education system. Martino (2008) argued that since the beginning of public schools in Upper Canada, "teaching was largely the domain of young, White, middle-class males" (p. 196). Around the mid-nineteenth century this began to change. As Danylewycz and Prentice (1986) noted, the ranks of the profession began to fill with young, unmarried women who often saw teaching as a respectable interlude between their own education and getting married. As a consequence, Harrigan (1992) found the length of the average career for teachers was approximately six years during the interwar period. This only began to change around the time when Barry entered the teaching profession, as women began to teach after marriage. However, Armstrong and Armstrong (2010) found "between 1971 and 1991 . . . teaching—became even more of a female job" (p. 36) as more women began to teach, while more men entered administrative positions such as principalships.



The increasing number of female teachers has been widely studied, especially by gender historians, under the term “feminization.” As Martino (2008) explained, “*feminization*, as it applies to elementary school teaching, relates to three interrelated phenomena” that have “influenced significantly the perception of women in the workforce in terms of their perceived threat to male power” (p. 218). These phenomena are “the increasing number of female teachers relative to male teachers”; “the cultural context or environment of school which is considered to be more ‘girl friendly’”; and “a backlash politics fuelled by global capitalism, which has had an impact on traditional patterns of employment, relationships, etc.” (p. 218). It should be noted that the “feminization” of teaching has been criticized by individuals including Danylewycz and Prentice (1986) for ignoring the “large numbers of women teachers in colonial and pre-industrial communities, thus reinforcing women's invisibility in the more distant past” (p. 141).

When Barry began his career, there was a great demand for male teachers as a direct response to this so-called feminization of teaching. The ease at which he was hired as a teacher may be seen as a reaction to what Abbott (1986) describes as the decades-long fears that “female domination of the teaching ranks threatened the cult of true manhood” (p. 314). As the Ontario Assistant Chief Inspector MacDougall said in 1920, it was “a man’s task to carry out the diverse duties that devolved upon our leaders” (as cited in Abbott, 1986, p. 314). Barry’s ease at entering the profession reflected Harrigan’s (1992) conclusion that “strong efforts were made to recruit men into teaching because of a ‘female imbalance’” (p. 486) following World War II.

After a year of working as a teacher/principal at Crookston, the inspector told Barry he needed a male teacher in Tweed, Ontario, and offered him a salary of \$3,000. Barry’s salary, due to his status as a man and his education, was one of the highest in the district (ODE, 1956). The summer after Barry’s first year at Tweed, he married Mary Raddon, his classmate from teachers’

college who had been teaching in Peterborough. The two taught together at Tweed for the year following their marriage.

While Tweed was a larger school, in a village of 1,654, it was still quite rural (ODE, 1956). As Cavanagh (2003) noted, “it was more difficult for the rural teacher to achieve a professional status on a par with the urban teacher” (p. 42). Barry and Mary felt they were underpaid; according to Barry, “we wanted raises and we were not going to get them” (personal communication, March 11, 2010). Knowing that urban boards were typically considered more prestigious and paid higher salaries than rural ones, Barry and Mary applied to teach in Ancaster, Ontario, and were hired. However, shortly after moving to Ancaster, Mary became pregnant with their first child and retired from teaching. Barry did receive the pay raise he was looking for. He started teaching in Ancaster at C.H. Bray Elementary School in 1958, with an annual salary of \$4,100 (ODE, 1958).

After teaching in Ancaster for a few years, and with a growing family, Barry and Mary were finding it difficult to live off a teacher’s salary. Around the time his second daughter was born, Barry began to pursue a Bachelor of Arts part-time. Barry took courses at night and in the summer and eventually earned his BA in 1965. When Barry started teaching in 1953 a post-secondary degree was not required. However, by the 1960s Barry felt the professional community was “pushing for it” (personal communication, March 11, 2010). Having his BA raised Barry’s salary category and increased his annual income. To further raise his salary, Barry decided to pursue principalship. This salary increase would enable Barry and Mary to purchase their first home, with the help of family members.

Barry’s professional development and career path were shaped by shifts in Ontario’s education system, as it was increasingly emphasizing a formal, standardized, and bureaucratic

structure within schools and school boards. This ideological trend is indicated in the increasing number of teachers, like Barry, who were employed as principals after 1950. With the growing formalized structure in the school system came a more pronounced hierarchy among education professionals. As Barry noted, he wanted to become a principal because he saw the position as “something a little bit better,” adding, “I think that there’s a certain motivation you want to get ahead” (personal communication, March 11, 2010). He also stated that, in principalship, “there’s more money too. Money is a motive” (personal communication, March 11, 2010). This reflects Reynolds’ (1990) assessment that “in the teacher hierarchy, administrators ranked above teachers in terms of both prestige and pay” (p. 104).

Barry was encouraged to get his BA and to pursue principalship by his mentor, Ancaster principal Greg Clark. Barry recalls,

I was going to take Phys. Ed. courses, become a Phys. Ed. teacher or something. He said, “when you get older you might get a little tired of that.” Plus, he’s the one that said, “I can see you in a short time, you’ll need your degree and make as much as ten thousand a year.” So, I thought, “maybe he’s right,” so I went and started it. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

Barry received similar encouragement to earn his principals’ certification through the Department of Education professional development courses. When asked why he chose to get the certificate, Barry responded,

Greg Clarke, a principal I had—told me that you’d probably require it in the future, and he said it was a really good course, you got a lot out of it, because they hadn’t spoiled it with a lot of exams and stuff. In other words, you would get together in groups of high school, elementary, and that, and you’d discuss things and he said he *really* picked up a lot. . . . He said, “take it. Take it before they spoil it.” In other words: make it where you’ve got to write essays and that. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

As predicted, the principals’ certification course was soon changed to include more of a written component and became mandatory for Ontario principals.

Barry's recognition of the importance credentials would have in his chosen profession was astute. As Cavanagh (2003) noted, "the masculine ideal of professionalism required high levels of certification," and this kind of "credentialism [became] the marker of professional stature" (p. 42). According to Harrigan (1992), "only about one-quarter of those teaching during the 1960s held university degrees" (p. 497–499). When Barry pursued his BA and later his principals' certification, he was part of what Harrigan describes as the "great upsurge in teachers' certification" in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was "an explosion of university degrees . . . as a degree became a prerequisite for admission to teachers' colleges" (p. 497–499). Most teachers getting degrees were men. When Barry received his BA in 1965, 50% of male teachers in Canada had a degree while only 17% of female teachers had the same level of education (p. 499). According to Harrigan, this gender imbalance among professional qualifications was a feature of the education profession at the time, as "males consistently held higher qualifications than did females" (p. 500). In turn, the "higher formal qualifications both reflected greater administrative opportunity for men and reinforced males in such posts" (p. 500). This helped preserve the advantage of male educational professionals when "salaries became linked to qualifications rather than directly to gender" after the late 1950s (p. 500). Men like Barry remained more qualified than the majority of their female colleagues and moved more easily to the managerial principalship roles, thus reflecting Harrigan's conclusion that "school systems no longer overtly discriminated against women, but cultural norms and career patterns assured continued male advantage" (p. 500).

Once Barry attained his formal qualifications, he began the process of applying for principal positions. Barry recalls his experience:

I applied for one school and I didn't get it . . . but the supervisor told me it wasn't the easiest school for anybody, let alone somebody starting out. And

he said there might be a [position available in] another [school], which meant more than the first one. He said, “if I were you, I’d apply for it and take it.” And I did. And I was only in it a year when I got [C.H.] Bray, which was the nice school. (personal communication, March 11, 2010)

Barry was approximately 33 years old when he became a principal. While earlier generations of men were generally promoted to principalship in their 40s, Barry’s young age was typical of the many men in the 1960s and 1970s who “found themselves in a principalship long before they were 40 and with only a few years of classroom experience” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 141).

As a male elementary school principal, Barry was typical of the gendered structure of the education system described by Danylewycz, Light, and Prentice (1983), where “in general, women have held the lower paying jobs at the bottom of educational occupational ladders and men have been favoured at the top” (p. 83). Reynolds (1990) confirmed this when she found from the 1950s to 1980s, “women on average continued to receive lower wages for their labour” in schools, due to the fact that “salary incentives were a part of movement up the teacher hierarchy” towards principalship, and “relatively few women obtained these positions” (p. 99).

In addition to the gender disparity in qualifications, there was also an institutionalized bias against female principals. Barry, like many at the time, believed that women chose not to become principals because they felt the position would conflict with their household commitments. Whether or not this was true, Reynolds (1995) noted women were often overlooked for principalship roles because of the prevalence of this belief among school board administration. Interestingly, while almost all of the male principals Reynolds (1995) interviewed were married with children (like Barry), relatively few of the female principals were married or had children. The prevalent assumption was “if they had children, women’s commitment to their family was placed . . . as being in conflict with their commitment to their

role as a principal even though little or no conflict was seen for their male colleagues” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 139).

Barry became a principal in the midst of a strong administrative shift in the education system. One-room schoolhouses were being shut down and centralized schools were being built. Stamp (1982) stated, “in the brief two-year period between 1965 and 1967, the number of one-room schools shrank from 1,463 to 530 as the township boards jumped on the bandwagon of central schools” (p. 209). Ontario also passed legislation aimed at a “centralization of administration,” as school boards were first amalgamated into township-sized and then to county-sized boards (p. 208). This created a large demand for principals to manage the multi-room schools, and the number of teachers employed as principals grew quickly. For instance, according to Reynolds (1990), in 1940, 20.5% of the secondary staff in the Toronto School Board were in management positions, such as principalships, while 79.7% were teachers (p. 99). By 1980, the percent in management rose to 47.6%, while 52.4% were designated teachers (p. 99). Barry was part of the ever-growing number of principals in Ontario public schools. But these principals were generally men. This is seen up to the end of Barry’s career, when, in 1988, Rees (1990) found males constituted 81.2% of principals in Ontario elementary schools while comprising only 28.9% of the total staff in elementary schools (p. 14).

Although he acknowledges that more men than women were employed as principals, Barry does not believe his gender influenced his promotion to principalship in 1965. Like the men Reynolds (1995) interviewed, Barry echoes the belief that it was “knowing when to be quiet and not rock the boat” (p. 136) that made him a successful principal candidate. When asked, “Why do you think you got the job of principal?” Barry replied,

I was known as Mr. Diplomat. Now, I didn’t, I didn’t lie, but I knew how to keep things going. . . . I got along well with the staff and the kids and the

parents, so it still worked out the same way when I got into principalship.”  
(personal communication, March 11, 2010)

Barry continued to work as a principal until he retired in 1989.

Barry’s “Mr. Diplomat” attitude seems to be a typical desired characteristic among men promoted to principalship. Barry’s self-description mirrors one of Reynolds’ (1995) male interviewees, who, when asked “What were you doing right? Why were you getting so many promotions?” replied, “Because I wasn’t doing anything [laughter]. I wasn’t causing problems” (p. 136). While Barry attributed his principalship to his qualifications, his knowledge of the community, and his “Mr. Diplomat” attitude, it can nonetheless be hypothesized that his gender influenced his principalship simply by looking at the disproportionate amount of men in the role. It did not have to be direct. Rather, it may have been a cumulation of factors—some of which were evident in Barry’s experience—such as the qualifications disparity between men and women educators, a protectionist reaction against feminization, the real or imagined rejection of principalship by female educators with domestic responsibilities, or numerous other social, cultural, and legal factors that gave preference to male teachers and prevented females from moving to principalship.

In conclusion, Barry’s work experience starting as a teacher, pursuing additional qualifications, and then moving to principalship were, in general, fairly typical of male educators in the profession at the time. As indicated in this description of Barry’s work experiences, issues of gender were pervasive and fundamentally affected Barry’s career. His experience, while typical, also reflects the difficulty of generalizing the profession at the time, when its organizational structure was undergoing dramatic and fundamental shifts. Learning about Barry’s experience helps

individuate the work experience of educators, and hints at the true diversity of the society and culture.



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